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ARTICLE APPEARED
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THE WASHINGTON POST
10 January 1979

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The 'Encryption' Gamble

A major concession to the Soviet Union that permits the results of test flights of Soviet strategic missiles to be partly concealed from the United States has raised a potent threat to President Carter's hopes for Senate approval of a new strategic arms limitation treaty (SALT II).

Still shrouded in official secrecy, the concession was agreed to by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance during his latest arms-control talks with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko in Geneva three weeks ago. What makes it so serious is its effect on verification—the process by which the United States tries to prove or verify that the Russians are not cheating.

Thus, at stake is an extremely grave issue for Carter and his country: whether Moscow can get away with secret missile tests that could violate the treaty and endanger U.S. and Western safety, something neither Vance nor any other responsible official could conceivably wish to happen.

Verification will be the paramount issue in the Senate when the new SALT agreement is submitted for approval. If President Carter can make a strong case that SALT II is verifiable, Senate approval will still be difficult but perhaps attainable; if Carter cannot make a strong case, SALT II will go the way of the Versailles Treaty.

The concession made by the United States at Geneva permits the Russians to continue "encrypting" in secret code information routinely radioed to ground stations from a missile during its test flight. This information, known as telemetry, is radioed back to earth on 40 to 60 separate radio channels, one channel for each component of the missile, so that Soviet weapons experts can learn the test results.

By far the most important source of U.S. information on Soviet missilery is the test-flight telemetry picked up by U.S. satellites and other monitors as it is radioed back to earth. There was consternation three years ago when the Russians started encrypting test data from the medium-range SS20 mobile missile—but that missile is not covered by SALT.

Last summer, however, the Soviets are known to have encrypted at least one test of their giant SS18 intercontinental missile with 10 independently targeted warheads. When the United States realized that SS18 test data were being concealed, Central Intelligence Director Stansfield Turner went to Carter and, on the basis of highest national security, urged him to demand a halt. He produced prima facie evidence that the Russians had encrypted most of the 40 to 60 channels of test data radioed back to earth. Indeed, only four channels of this vital information could be "read" by U.S. monitors.

Carter ordered that a formal complaint be made to Moscow, but the Kremlin came back with an air of injured innocence. There is nothing in SALT I that prohibits encryption, they said.

Now, instead of demanding a complete halt to encrypting, the United States agreed at Geneva to ambiguous language allowing encryption except where the information put into secret code has a direct bearing on verification. That theoretically makes the Soviet Union its own policeman. Only the Soviets would know what secret performance data they are concealing, and they could conceal it by claiming it did not deal with specific weapons limitations imposed by the new treaty.

In the closed society of the Soviet Union, nothing is publicly revealed about weapons development. Thus, when the American theory of anti-cheating verification was first developed in 1972, it meant the right of the United States, through electronic eavesdropping and any other monitoring devices, to establish the truth of Soviet claims about its nuclear missiles.

But today, following the reign of Paul Warnke as director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, verification has been qualified by the word "adequate." All that is now required is to ensure that the United States will discover Soviet cheating before it has "significantly affected" the U.S.-Soviet strategic balance of power.

Vance's concession on encryption shows how far the word "adequate" allows the Soviets to go on concealing perhaps vital parts of their test programs. Even worse, SALT II does nothing to block two other ways in which the Soviets could thwart verification: by sending its flight-test telemetry back to ground by low-powered transmitters, which the U.S. could not monitor, or by not transmitting at all, but encasing the test data in a little black box and retrieving the box after the test.

Given the vivid evidence of Soviet willingness to thwart verification, SALT skeptics and critics are asking why the new treaty ignores these two other tactics, which could deny the United States information that could be vital to its future.

Encryption, with Carter's inadequate answer to it, is by no means the only or even the principal target for anti-SALT senators, but it may become the most important because of its intimate association with verification. The treaty will likely rise or fall on how senators feel about legal rights given the United States to detect Soviet cheating.

For the Soviets, few missile secrets cannot be discovered in the open U.S. society. For the United States, verification is the name of the game to hold Moscow to the letter and spirit of SALT II.